

## PEASANTS, POWER AND ETHNICITY: A BOTTOM-UP PERSPECTIVE ON RWANDA'S POLITICAL TRANSITION

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyses over 400 life trajectories of ordinary peasants in order to complement top-down studies of the Rwandan political transition. Changes and differences according to the ethnicity of the respondents shed light on the Hutu–Tutsi bi-polarity which underlies the transition and reveal a reversal in perceived ethnic dominance accompanying the decisive moment in the political transition: the overthrow of the Hutu-dominated regime by the Tutsi-led RPF. This suggests that the experience of the nature of governance and the (perceived) proximity to power lies at the heart of ethnic awareness. The nature of governance at the periphery of society is explored, and the article demonstrates that the instrumental stance on ethnic identity adopted by the post-genocide regime is not only erroneous but counter-productive. Adjusting the socio-political environment in which identities thrive is more important than a direct focus on identity constructs when developing policies to prevent ethnically structured violence.

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DESPITE MUCH WRITING ON RWANDA'S TRANSITION from a Hutu-dominated 'developmental dictatorship' through civil war and genocide to the Tutsi-dominated RPF government, the experience of transition by

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the ordinary population remains largely unexplored.<sup>1</sup> This article offers a bottom-up perspective that intends to 'bring peasants back into an understanding of the political and social processes of the state'<sup>2</sup> by focusing on 'the voices of people who have nuanced stories to tell: Rwandan farmers whose lives are socially constructed'.<sup>3</sup> A bottom-up perspective on 'transition' is necessary, and this material is used to bring into focus one of Rwanda's taboo social constructs *par excellence*: ethnicity.

If, as David Newbury suggests, Rwanda's ethnic identities are socially produced and 'deeply influenced by power' such that 'changes in these categories are related to changes in the power context',<sup>4</sup> this article asks what happens to ethnicity after a political transition from a regime that rested its power on the idea of Hutu supremacy towards a regime with power consolidated in the hands of a former Tutsi minority-dominated rebel group?<sup>5</sup>

A danger of reification exists when focusing on crude ethnic categories. As Nigel Eltringham rightly remarks, one has to avoid 'absolutist schema of social distinction that they [genocide perpetrators] project on to society and the absolutist version of history to which they appeal'.<sup>6</sup> But the focus in this article on ethnicity does not imply that other dimensions of Rwandan identities – such as socio-economic class, professional status, regional affiliation, gender, or age – are ignored or considered to be irrelevant. On the contrary, a comparative micro-analysis of the genocide demonstrates,

1. On the Rwandan transition between 1990 and 1994, see Filip Reyntjens, *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs en crise: Rwanda, Burundi, 1988–1994* (Editions Karthala, Paris, 1994); Gerard Prunier, *The Rwandan Crisis: History of a genocide* (Columbia University Press, New York, NY, 1995); André Guichaoua (ed.), *Les Crises Politiques au Burundi et au Rwanda (1993–1994)* (Editions Karthala, Paris, 1995); René Lemarchand, 'Managing transition anarchies: Rwanda, Burundi and South Africa in comparative perspective', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 32, 4 (1994), pp. 581–604. On (mainly) the second phase of the transition see Filip Reyntjens, 'La transition politique au Rwanda' in Filip Reyntjens and Stefaan Marysse (eds), *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs: Annuaire 2003–2004* (L'Harmattan, Paris, 2004), pp. 1–22; Filip Reyntjens, 'Rwanda, ten years on: from genocide to dictatorship', *African Affairs* 103, 411 (2004), pp. 177–210; Filip Reyntjens, 'Les transitions politiques au Rwanda et au Burundi' in Filip Reyntjens and Stefaan Marysse (eds) *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs – dix ans de transitions conflictuelles: Annuaire 2005–2006* (L'Harmattan, Paris, 2006), pp. 3–23; Marina Rafti, 'A perilous path to democracy: political transition and authoritarian consolidation in Rwanda' (Discussion Paper 2008.03, Institute of Development Policy and Management, Antwerp, 2007).

2. David Newbury and Catharine Newbury, 'Bringing peasants back in: agrarian themes in the construction and corrosion of statist historiography in Rwanda', *American Historical Review* 105, 3 (2000), p. 874.

3. Johan Pottier, *Re-Imagining Rwanda: Conflict, survival and disinformation in the late twentieth century* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002), p. 202.

4. David Newbury, 'Understanding genocide', *African Studies Review* 41, 1 (1998), p. 85.

5. To understand the nature of the ideological underpinnings of the previous regime see Philip Verwimp, 'Development ideology, the peasantry and genocide', *Journal of Genocide Research* 2, 3 (2000), pp. 325–61.

6. Nigel Eltringham, *Accounting for Horror: Post-genocide debates in Rwanda* (Pluto Press, London, 2004), p. xiv.

for example, that the violence unleashed at the macro level was appropriated and fundamentally shaped by the micro-political matrices and social formations in which it took hold.<sup>7</sup> Genocide, although shaped from above, was significantly reshaped in a highly differentiated terrain of local social tensions and cleavages, regional differences, and communal or individual particularities. The genocidal violence reflected both the goals of the supra-local forces and factors – mainly the Hutu–Tutsi cleavage mobilized by political actors for political purposes – and their local shadows – struggles for power, fear, (intra-group) coercion, the quest for economic resources and personal gain, vendettas and the settling of old scores.<sup>8</sup>

This article nevertheless focuses on ethnicity because Rwanda is a bi-polar society with Hutu (approximately 84 percent) and Tutsi (approximately 14 percent) as the main identity groups marking the social and political landscape; but also because of the fact that the master narratives of the 1994 genocide and other periods of violence and war in Rwandan history were always structured along ethnic lines, even if the mobilizing momentum was (partly) derived from other motivating forces. And – most importantly – because ethnicity has officially been banned from public life it has become an unobservable variable in most (empirical) studies of post-genocide Rwanda. The few studies that have focused on identity suggest that ‘ethnicity remains a central factor for Rwandan social identity’<sup>9</sup> and that ‘today (ethnic) group identity is meaningful (arguably even more than before the genocide)’<sup>10</sup> or that ‘the Hutu/Tutsi distinctions are more rigid than ever’.<sup>11</sup> Penal Reform International, an NGO undertaking research

7. Bert Ingelaere, ‘Changing lenses and contextualizing the Rwandan (post-)genocide’ in Reyntjens and Marysse (eds), *L’Afrique des Grands Lacs – dix ans*, pp. 389–414.

8. For studies based on micro-level research highlighting the importance of either political or economic motives in the genocide, see Timothy Longman, ‘Genocide and socio-political change: massacres in two Rwandan villages’, *Issue: A Journal of Public Opinion* 13, 2 (1995), pp. 18–21; Catherine André and Jean-Philippe Platteau, ‘Land relations under unbearable stress: Rwanda caught in the Malthusian trap’, *Journal of Economic Behaviour and Organisation* 34 (1998), pp. 1–47; Michelle D. Wagner, ‘All the bourgemestre’s men: making sense of genocide in Rwanda’, *Africa Today* 45, 1 (1998), pp. 25–36; Villia Jefremovas, *Brickyards to Graveyards: From production to genocide in Rwanda* (State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2002); Danielle de Lame, *A Hill among a Thousand: Transformations and ruptures in rural Rwanda* (University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI, 2005); André Guichaoua, *Rwanda 1994: les politiques du génocide à Butare* (Editions Karthala, Paris, 2005); Philip Verwimp, ‘An economic profile of peasant perpetrators of genocide: micro-level evidence from Rwanda’, *Journal of Development Economics* 77, 2 (2005), pp. 297–323; S. Straus, *The Order of Genocide: Race, power and war in Rwanda* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY and London, 2006); Jean-Paul Kimonyo, *Rwanda: un génocide populaire* (Editions Karthala, Paris, 2008).

9. Timothy Longman, ‘Memory, identity and community in Rwanda’ in Eric Stover and Harvey M. Weinstein (eds), *My Neighbour, My Enemy: Justice and community in the aftermath of mass atrocity* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004), p. 176.

10. Susanne Buckley-Zistel, ‘Dividing and uniting: the use of citizenship discourses in conflict and reconciliation in Rwanda’, *Global Society* 20, 1 (2006), p. 112.

11. Eugenia Zorbas, ‘Reconciliation in post-genocide Rwanda’, *African Journal of Legal Studies* 1, 1 (2004), p. 42.

on the *gacaca* process and reconciliation, observes that Rwandans do not contest that they are all Rwandans, but that this does not necessarily mean that the feeling of ethnic belonging persists as well: 'the racist and discriminatory dimension of ethnic belonging does not appear diminished'.<sup>12</sup> Although these studies are very well researched and argued, an understanding of the breadth of such arguments remains absent.

This article therefore has two interrelated objectives: exploring in a systematic way the enduring and changing aspects of ethnicity in the context of Rwanda's political transition, and offering a methodological example of research on a difficult topic in a closed and controlled research environment.

### *Fieldwork and methodology*

Rwanda's political transition started in 1990, but entered a new phase in 1994 with the genocide and then the victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). In order to capture the dynamics of change over this long period, an appropriate methodology is needed. Crucially, this methodological approach needs to facilitate the understanding of perceived comparisons without asking respondents explicit questions about the differences between the two regimes, let alone asking directly about perceived changes with respect to ethnicity. Direct questions of this kind by foreign researchers are not only unwelcome to the Rwandan political establishment and administrative authorities, but also tend to trigger politically correct answers from respondents.<sup>13</sup> Fieldwork on ethnic identities requires an innovative approach if it is to produce useful results. A thorough understanding of the socio-political and cultural context is required to capture not only trustworthy statements but, especially, undercurrents of social processes at work. Related to the identity question, Jennie Burnet concludes after months of ethnographic research in Rwanda that 'the RPF-regime has disguised the "ethnism" embedded in institutional and structural violence'.<sup>14</sup> These undercurrents, if they exist, will only come to the surface during 'rare moments of political electricity when . . . the hidden transcript is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power'.<sup>15</sup> In the absence of

12. Penal Reform International, 'From camp to hill: the reintegration of released prisoners' (research report on the *Gacaca*, Report VI, Paris and Kigali, 2004), p. 38.

13. On the particular nature of communication in Rwanda see Bert Ingelaere, "'Does the truth pass across the fire without burning?'" Locating the short circuit in Rwanda's *Gacaca* courts', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, 4 (2009), pp. 507–28.

14. Jennie E. Burnet, 'Whose genocide? Whose truth? Representations of victim and perpetrator in Rwanda' in Alex Laban Hinton and Kevin O'Neill (eds), *Genocide: Truth, memory and representation* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2009).

15. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden transcripts* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT and London, 1990), p. 14.

such events, one has to find an interpretation of the 'cryptic and opaque'.<sup>16</sup> In Rwanda – as elsewhere – there is a second world lying beyond political correctness and rehearsed consensus.

Therefore, the topic was approached sideways by collecting life histories and subjective rankings from significant numbers of respondents.<sup>17</sup> The respondents not only told their own stories, but also – indirectly – the story of regime change and the story of changes in ethnic perceptions over time. An analysis of these numerous life story elements in the narratives enabled us to understand what it means to live through a transition, a period of violence, and to move from one regime into another. Apart from this qualitative or ethnographic research strategy, there was an added quantitative element to the exercise.<sup>18</sup> During each life story interview an image was used to help the respondents in assessing the key theme of the feeling of political representation in the different periods in their lifespan (Figure 1).<sup>19</sup> In the life story interviews a value between –5 and +5 was given (by the respondent) through pointing to the appropriate step on the ladder for each year during the adult life cycle.

First, the nature of the image was explained: on top of the ladder are those people who feel the most politically represented in 'the community of the respondent', so as to avoid comparison with residents of Kigali, which would oblige them (in their perception) always to choose the bottom steps. The spatial reference is their own community, and the field sites in

16. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

17. A life story approach in Rwanda has previously been adopted by Helen Codere, *The Biography of an African Society: Rwanda 1900–1960. Based on forty-eight Rwandan autobiographies* (Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika, Tervuren, Series In-8°, No. 79, 1973); Catharine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression: Clientship and ethnicity in Rwanda, 1860–1960* (Columbia University Press, New York, NY, 1988); de Lame, *A Hill among a Thousand*. For the post-genocide period, see Susan M. Thomson, *Resisting Reconciliation: Everyday life and state power in post-genocide Rwanda* (Dalhousie University, unpublished PhD thesis, 2009).

18. The aim of the research activities was to strike a balance between collecting quantitative rankings and qualitative narratives. In order to increase the sample more emphasis was put on gathering rankings from all respondents and reducing narratives. This article is informed by an in-depth analysis of the life story narratives collected, but only presents the quantitative rankings. A more extensive reference to the methodology and narratives can be found in Bert Ingelaere, 'Living the transition: a bottom-up perspective on Rwanda's political transition' (Discussion Paper 2007.06, Institute of Development Policy and Management, Antwerp, 2007).

19. Inspired by Hadley Cantril, *The Pattern of Human Concerns* (Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1965). The World Bank research on movement out of poverty makes use of a similar 'ladder of life' tool in order to understand perceived changes over time. This approach was an inspiration in the development of design and methodology of this study. See Deepa Narayan (ed.), *Measuring Empowerment: Cross-disciplinary perspectives* (World Bank, Washington, DC, 2005) and Deepa Narayan and Patti Petesh (eds), *Moving out of Poverty: Cross-disciplinary perspectives on mobility* (World Bank, Washington, DC, 2007).

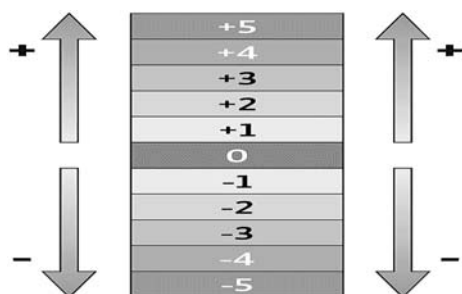


Figure 1. 'Ladder of life'.

this study were always rural with predominantly peasant inhabitants.<sup>20</sup> When the geographical area for comparison was defined and the people on the top step characterized (step +5), the nature of the bottom step was further explained as people who are 'the worst off in political representation in the community' (step -5). The enumerators and my translator were trained (and supervised) always to use exactly the same phrasings to explain the nature of the ladder and its steps in order to avoid a heterogeneous interpretation by the respondents.<sup>21</sup> Equally important is the fact that all respondents have a similar understanding of the concept of 'political representation'. The respondent was always first asked to describe in his/her own words how he/she interpreted this notion, and the analysis of these

20. We refer to sectors rather than 'villages', as in Rwanda people live dispersed on the hills in the countryside and are grouped in administrative units. We define the local level, a local community, as equivalent to the cell and sector level which existed before the administrative restructuring of January 2006.

21. All of the life story interviews and rankings were conducted by the author, together with five Rwandan field assistants. The interviewers were selected based on their previous experience with participation in survey and qualitative research, their capacity to reside in rural communities, and their skill in interaction with the peasant population. The enumerators were not inhabitants of the communities. They received several days' training on the principles and methods of life story interviews and general fieldwork. The life stories were collected in each community with all enumerators present and the author as supervisor. It was highlighted that we had the permission from both national and local authorities to conduct the research. We always stressed the fact that we were not connected or working for the government. All interviews were administered in the house of the respondent. The interviews were translated from Kinyarwanda to French by a field-assistant/translator. The interviewers wrote down expressions in Kinyarwanda with a specific meaning surpassing immediate possibility of translation. These were discussed afterwards and compared with the translated statements. All interviews were later typed out by another assistant, who would also annotate the interviews when faced with particularities related to translation of statements from Kinyarwanda. We did not use recording devices since respondents may not be familiar with them and they may arouse suspicion, affecting responses.



responses indicated a shared understanding.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, the respondents were asked to place themselves on the ladder. The question asked for every period or year was: 'At this point in your life, where do you situate the experience of political representation compared to the other inhabitants of your community (sector)?' Subsequently, a move back in time was made to the year of marriage or the first year of adult life (if single), repeating the question for that point. The same questions were then asked with reference to the past, asking a rating for every year. The findings from the life story narrative were used to help people recall their situation at a certain moment in time. For example, when someone had told us he or she had a firstborn child in 1986, reference would be made to 1986 as 'the year when your first child was born'. It needs to be noted that the scale (ladder) itself remains fixed throughout the different periods in time. The scale functions as a mental map and background against which the personal movement up and down the ladder of life – the imaginary but stable situations/levels of political representation – is assessed 'in time' and 'in comparison' with the surrounding environment: the fellow community members, also moving on the ladder of life.

These rankings are indicators of perceptions, and portray changes in rankings over time: events and periods in the past are reinterpreted through the lens of events happening during subsequent life periods. Since no baseline data are available, recall is the best means to get at these issues. Moreover, since the objective is to understand the experience and perceptions of transition, recollection reflects how perceptions work: they are influenced by individual experiences in the past and mediated by discourses produced by the government, media, and other institutions, past and present.

The selection of communities (sectors) was guided by the principle of 'attaining maximum variance'.<sup>23</sup> The variance in field sites allowed for an indicative apprehension of life experiences incorporating various dynamics of historical events and state or societal practices. Field sites are

22. Rankings for the economic situation, the feeling of security and confidence, and the discussion of the narratives accompanying these rankings are discussed in Ingelaere, 'Living the transition: a bottom-up perspective', pp. 24–47 and Bert Ingelaere, 'Living the transition: inside Rwanda's conflict cycle at the grassroots', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 3, 3 (2009), pp. 438–63.

23. Ingelaere, 'Living the transition: a bottom-up perspective', pp. 19–21; this procedure was modelled on the work of, for example, Ashutosh Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT and London, 2002), and Chris Gibson and Michael Woolcock, 'Empowerment and local level conflict mediation in Indonesia: a comparative analysis of concepts, measures, and project efficacy' (World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 3713, World Bank, Washington DC, 2005). The communities are situated in the different regions of Rwanda – North, Central and South-Central, East and South-East.

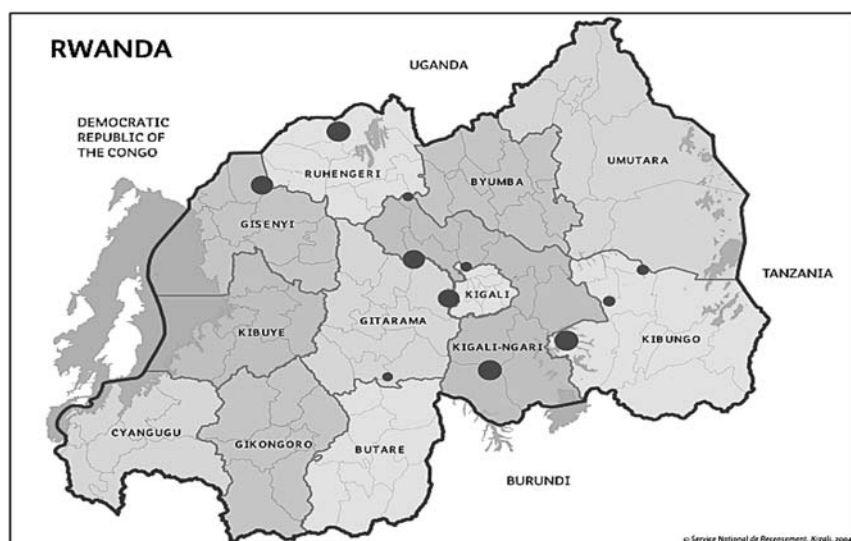


Figure 2. Field sites.

highlighted in the map (Figure 2). Large dots are sites where life stories were collected.

Although Rwanda continues to be ethnically bi-polar, with Hutu and Tutsi as the main ethnic groups, it is no longer permitted to identify people through these ethnic markers; instead, 'new' social groups with new forms of markers have emerged.<sup>24</sup> Local inhabitants distinguish five social labels to identify themselves and others. Tutsi inhabitants are divided into 'genocide survivors' and 'old caseload returnees'. In the latter case, they, their parents or even their grandparents fled Rwanda after the so-called Hutu Revolution of 1959 and returned to Rwanda after the end of the genocide and the RPF take-over in 1994.<sup>25</sup> Hutu inhabitants are described as 'released prisoners', those 'accused in *Gacaca*' and those who are 'not accused and have never been imprisoned'.<sup>26</sup> Lists were compiled with the names of all the household heads on the selected hills and several groups of key informants were asked to identify every household according to one of these five groups. Subsequently, through a stratified random

24. See Eltringham, *Accounting for Horror* for a discussion of these new identities.

25. During the life story interviews with 'old caseload returnees' the questions about political representation in the 1980s (when they did not live in Rwanda) was not further qualified but asked as prescribed in the standard procedure. It implies that respondents in their narratives and rankings predominantly took into account both the feeling of representation in the countries where they resided at the time and in relation to their home country, Rwanda.

26. We did not use the category of so-called 'new caseload returnees' since this category is no longer salient in social life in the Rwandan hills.



Table 1. Overview of respondents

|   | Male | Female | Total |
|---|------|--------|-------|
| Hutu not accused in <i>Gacaca</i> /Never incarcerated | 74   | 62     | 136   |
| Hutu accused in <i>Gacaca</i>                         | 68   | 9      | 77    |
| Hutu released prisoners                               | 58   | 0      | 58    |
| Tutsi survivors                                       | 36   | 49     | 85    |
| Tutsi old caseload returnees                          | 28   | 25     | 53    |
| Total Hutu  | 200  | 71     | 271   |
| Total Tutsi   | 64   | 74     | 138   |
| All respondents                                       | 264  | 145    | 409   |

sampling scheme, households within each group were selected and the heads of the household were interviewed with around 70 respondents in each locality (Table 1).<sup>27</sup> Selected persons were all over 30, since respondents needed to have lived through the transition and regime changes and be aware of the period since 1990 and 1994.<sup>28</sup> The research is based on several periods of research from July 2004 to April 2007, and all life story interviews were conducted between January and April 2007.

#### *Ethnicity in Rwanda: a constructivist reading*

An analysis of peasant narratives indicates that there are at least two understandings of the notion 'political representation'. Political representation (*guhagarirwa*) is understood as the idea of being able to send someone to a meeting or a decision-making body so that this person will defend your interests. It entails the idea that the authorities become aware of your living conditions, the problems you face and the well-being – or problems – of those who are represented. Through almost personal contact, the representative should know 'how you are doing' and therefore be able to transfer a message to the authorities higher up. This kind of representation is about being aware of the needs of the population and responding to those needs. Representation also involves (territorial) security and the resolution of small-scale conflicts. An additional dimension of political representation

27. Some communities did not have old caseload returnees; others didn't have released prisoners.

28. Interviewers were instructed to start the ranking exercise from the first year of adult life or marriage – or, if necessary, always in the year 1990, even if the respondent was not yet adult or not yet married then. This implies that very few respondents were below adult age in 1990. It also implies that for the 1980s there are less observations (rankings). Weighting was applied in order to account for research design and sampling procedure. The figures picture the weighted 'average' ranking of all respondents. For the years 1980–9, these weighted averages are based on the rankings of less than all respondents, since some respondents were not of adult age or were not yet married.

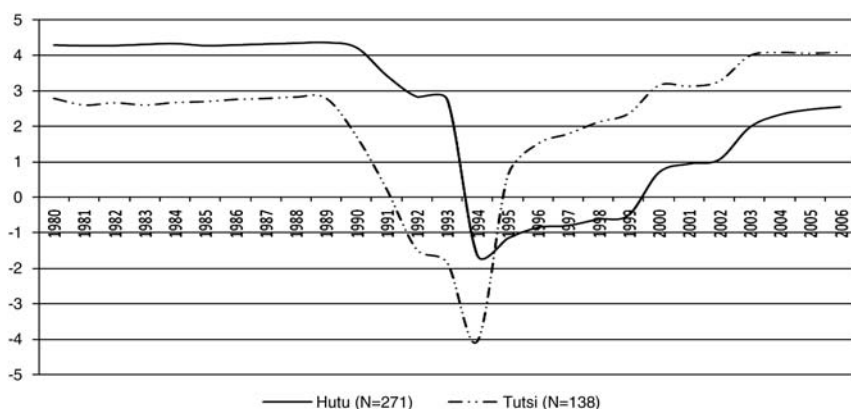


Figure 3. Subjective rankings political representation (weighted results).

frequently mentioned by respondents concerns 'how one represents' and how one governs. This concerns how power is exercised. Governing in an impartial way means preventing suffering from injustices that remain unpunished (*kugukosereza*); it also means that one should not be subject to violent behaviour (*guhohoterwa*). Even more important is the principle that the governed should not suffer from prejudice and injustice emanating from the administration itself, from those who govern or misgovern. Others should not be allowed to impede you from reaching your goal (*ukubangamira*). A preliminary condition of feeling represented is that one does not feel targeted by those exercising power, that one does not have the impression that 'all means are employed to do you bad' (*kukwirunkankiraho*).

Respondents were not explicitly asked to compare pre- and post-genocide Rwanda. Instead, the findings from the subjective ranking exercise reveal what it means to live through a political transition, from one regime into another, from peace through violence and back into some kind of peace. When considering the ethnic identity of the respondents, the differences in the rankings further establish an insight into a 'hidden transcript', something that 'lives' in the population but remains invisible because banned from public life and, therefore, difficult to capture. Figure 3 depicts the overall evolution of perceptions of political representation between 1980 and 2006, and confirms some of the 'understandings' of pre- and post-genocide Rwanda and the transition in general, while refuting others. Strikingly, Hutu and Tutsi trajectories have evolved in remarkably similar ways – there is never much discrepancy between Hutu and Tutsi perceptions. However, there is an ethnic reversal in the experience of political representation. Hutu appreciate the nature of political representation after the 1994 regime change in a similar way as Tutsi did during the Habyari-

mana regime. Tutsi respondents, on the other hand, situate themselves at the level where Hutu claim their representation had been during the previous regime.

What remains to be explored and explained is, first, the fact that in popular perceptions ethnicity remains durable in post-genocide Rwanda despite a 'new Rwanda' where ethnicity has been officially abolished and where a discourse of Rwandan citizenship prevails over the use of ethnic identity markers. The graph reveals a marked reversal of ethnic dominance in rankings depicting the feeling of political representation, in which the difference between the Hutu and Tutsi rankings on political representation changes over time: diverging in the 1990s; converging since 2000; and stable in the 1980s.

These data can only be explained by invoking the nature of ethnic identities. A constructivist understanding of ethnicity suggests that, on the one hand, ethnic identities are shaped by the socio-political context and, on the other hand, that they have a 'depth' beyond utility.<sup>29</sup> A constructivist understanding of ethnicity in Rwanda argues that the crystallization of ethnic identities was the result of socio-political transformations starting before the advent of colonialism, under the reign of King Rwabugiri (1865–95), and further rigidified under colonial rule. A Tutsi identity was shaped in relation to the wealth and power associated with royal and later government status and institutions, while a Hutu awareness developed in relation to this other identity group and as a result of a situation of subordination. This insight implies that 'internal components and the interrelations among ethnic categories vary over time',<sup>30</sup> and that power and the perceived nature of (the proximity to) power constitute an important factor in understanding these changes.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, to advance the interpretation of the findings attention needs to be paid to power in its more overt manifestation and in its various disguises.<sup>32</sup> Not only are the various (interpretations of) changes of power in

29. The crystallization and the (changing) nature of ethnic identities in Rwanda is of central importance in the work of Catharine Newbury and David Newbury. See Catharine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression*; Catharine Newbury, 'Ethnicity in Rwanda: the case of Kinyaga', *Africa* 48, 1 (1978), pp. 17–29; Catharine Newbury and David Newbury, 'A Catholic mass in Kigali: contested views of genocide and ethnicity in Rwanda', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 33, 2/3 (1999), pp. 312–16; David Newbury, *Understanding Genocide*, pp. 83–8. Both Catharine and David Newbury's writings on ethnicity and the importance of the factor of power were instructive in the understanding of the rankings presented in this paper. An insightful discussion of the different paradigms to understand ethnicity is available in Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict*, pp. 24–39. A social constructivist position in the understanding of violent ethnic conflict is examined in James. D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, 'Violence and the social construction of ethnic identity', *International Organization* 54, 4 (2000), pp. 845–77.

30. Newbury and Newbury, 'A Catholic mass', p. 313.

31. Catharine Newbury, *The Cohesion of Oppression*, p. 51.

32. John Gledhill, *Power and Its Disguises: Anthropological perspectives on politics* (Pluto Press, London, 1994).

history important, but so are the socio-political changes brought about by state-sanctioned practices at the periphery of society. Examples are given of how state-sanctioned practices influence the interrelation of ethnic categories in the current under-observed period and further identify some clues by breaking up the crude ethnic categories used in the graphs into ethnic sub-categories. First, the influence of historical mentalities is addressed.

### *Historical legacies and mentalities*

Figure 3 portrays the cartography of the perceived interrelation of power and identity that structured and continues to structure the Rwandan socio-political landscape and everyday life, at least in the consciousness of its inhabitants. The ideological underpinnings of the Rwandan Republics (1963–73 and 1973–94) ‘constituted both a reversal and a continuation of [these] long-standing psycho-cultural images’ of the foreign, racially superior Tutsi pastoralist and native, subaltern Hutu cultivator.<sup>33</sup> These had been reinforced under colonial rule, so that Hutu and Tutsi remained distinct categories even after independence and the so-called revolution. In a historical reversal, Tutsi now became those considered ‘out of place’, inferior creatures in a newly regained natural order of Hutu homogeneity and majority control over the state:

In the neo-traditionalist 1931–59 version, the *petits Tutsis* felt proud of belonging to the ‘ethnic aristocracy’, although it brought them very little beyond the sense of superiority. Now [after the Hutu revolution] it was the Hutu who fell prey to the same error and mostly persuaded themselves that because the government was Hutu, they, the humble peasants from the hills, somehow shared in that power.<sup>34</sup>

The current rankings reveal a similar process at work, also identifiable in some key narratives collected during the fieldwork. The first account is from a Tutsi genocide survivor, Albert, who lives in central Rwanda and whose children were killed during the genocide.<sup>35</sup>

On the state, I have nothing to say. It is the state that organizes reconciliation without consulting us, without consulting the wise men. It is the state that does what it wants. The state decides what needs to be done. . . . The state says ‘you do this’ and you clap your hands. . . . [Referring to the genocide] People put into practice whatever you ask them to do (*Abantu ni ba nyamujya icyo bigiye* – Men follow the current of things). . . . We have a small pause of calm. There is peace but without guarantee. Habyarimana also said to bring us peace, but afterwards they killed our children. If you sleep at night and wake up in the morning, it’s good (*Ni ukubara ubukeye*). All changes always. Everything changes here on earth. The priest says things happen in eternal succession, so . . . . It [massacres] are things that often happen

33. Peter Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The development enterprise in Rwanda* (Kumarian Press, Bloomfield, CT, 1998), p. 33.

34. Gerard Prunier, *The Rwandan Crisis*, p. 80.

35. Names of individuals and places have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

since 1959. The authorities tell us that there is peace. For example in 1973. But see what happened in 1994. How much time has passed since 1994 to confirm that it will never happen again?<sup>36</sup>

This statement reflects an interpretation of the alternation of power in the course of Rwandan history and its repercussions for ordinary people during the event itself and in the aftermath. The second quote is from a Hutu, André, who also lives in the countryside in Central Rwanda. André is what is called an *évolué* in the peasantry class. He enjoyed higher education and is therefore considered an 'intellectual'. His family played an important role in the state administration during the First Republic under President Kayibanda, but lost all their privileges when Habyarimana came to power. André is not accused in *Gacaca* and was never imprisoned. His interpretation of the nature of power changes in Rwanda is nevertheless similar to that of Albert:

Why are you asking questions about power-sharing and democracy? In Rwandan tradition and custom, power is symbolized by the drum [*Ngoma*]. If you put your hands on the drum, it means you have power. What happens is that people are coming to put their hands on your arms holding the drum. Those people are your family and friends, the people of your group [ethnicity]. In that way they reap the benefits of power. But they also keep your hands pressed against the drum so they can continue to benefit. You don't have a lot of freedom of manoeuvre and there is not much room for others to profit. The only means for them to access the drum and thus power is to violently chop off the arm reaching for the drum and supporting those other arms. The drum moves to the hands of another and other arms are mustered to support and to be supported by the drum.<sup>37</sup>

Both accounts shed light on the 'underneath of things',<sup>38</sup> on the hidden undercurrent of ethnic politics, at least in the perception of the ordinary peasant. Alison Des Forges similarly draws attention to the recurring recourse to distant histories to justify present actions in her attempt to understand the dynamics of history and genocide in Rwanda.<sup>39</sup> These *mythico-histories* are not necessarily false or true but are ways in which people make sense of the past and the pragmatics of everyday life,<sup>40</sup> rendering actions and events meaningful for those involved<sup>41</sup> and giving content to ethnic identities and the perceived nature of their interrelation. This is un-

36. Interview, Central Rwanda, March 2006, Tutsi, genocide survivor, male, peasant, 56 years old.

37. Interview, Central Rwanda, February 2007, Hutu, male, teacher, 45 years old.

38. Marianne Ferme, *The Underneath of Things: Violence, history and the everyday in Sierra Leone*, (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2001).

39. Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (Human Rights Watch, New York, NY, 1999).

40. Liisa H. Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, memory, and national cosmology among Hutu refugees in Tanzania* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1995), p. 55.

41. Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz, *Culture Troubles: Politics and the interpretation of meaning* (Hurst and Co., London, 2006); Gledhill, *Power and Its Disguises*.

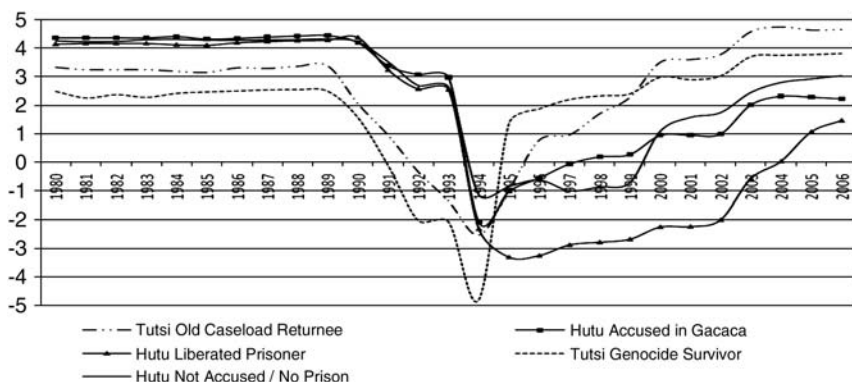


Figure 4. Subjective ranking of 'political representation' – ethnic (sub-) groups (weighted results).

derscored when breaking down the crude ethnic categories into sub-ethnic groups, as in Figure 4.

*Mythico-histories: former refugees and released prisoners*

The findings presented in Figure 4 correspond with the 'new' structures of hierarchy tacitly stratifying post-genocide Rwanda: the RPF and the current Rwandan regime are dominated by former refugees, especially those coming from Uganda.<sup>42</sup> Although our sample only contains 'old caseload returnee' members of the peasant class and inhabitants of rural Rwanda, the fact that they situate their own feeling of political representation very high in contemporary Rwanda reveals that they 'feel' themselves to belong to the inner circles of power. Connection with family members in Kigali who are actually part of this power structure will contribute to this feeling in a similar way as dignitaries in the former Hutu regime were linked with a base of support in their regions of origin, but much more extensively and intensely. Based on her research with Burundian Hutu refugees in Tanzania, Liisa Malkki has shown that nothing enhances ethnic awareness more than refugee status.<sup>43</sup> Forced into 'exile' for years, old caseload returnees constitute the social group that fully embraces the claim of liberation from the former Rwandan regime that had prevented them from returning home. On the other side of the scale are liberated Hutu prisoners. The shared fact

42. Reyntjens, 'Rwanda, ten years on'.

43. Malkki, *Purity and Exile*.



of being a prisoner and being labelled *génocidaire* made (former) prisoners develop or preserve an ethnic awareness similar to that of former exiles.<sup>44</sup>

The interpretation of these findings started with the suggestion that power and ethnicity are interconnected. A constructivist reading of ethnicity was adopted. This reading of ethnic identities was then further explored and supporting evidence in the 'ordinary' or 'perceived' interpretation of power changes in the past was found. Constructivism suggests that power and the exercise of power – the socio-political environment in general – influences the (perceived) interrelation of and changes in ethnic categories. So it needs to be verified whether and how the socio-political environment changed. Local governance is the embodiment of the socio-political environment and thus an additional element to be explored.

### *Governance in the periphery*

The nature of governance, the identity of local authorities, the particularity of their practices, and their connection with state power under the Habyarimana regime have been well documented.<sup>45</sup> Less is known about the experience of the nature of governance since the start of the transition in 1990. Insecurity, suspicion, and atrocity characterized these years. The figures visually paint the trajectory that the Rwandan transition took in the popular perception after 1990. For many people, clearly defined rules of conduct and social norms evaporated, creating the experience of a multi-polar landscape with threats to the socio-political order coming from different sides.

Fanned by the well-documented appeal to ethnic sentiments, the violence became ethnic in nature. Although the motivating forces often had socio-economic overtones, nothing more clearly accentuates the categorical clarity and purity of ethnic difference than violence: 'ethnic violence produces abstract tokens of ethnicity out of bodies of real persons'.<sup>46</sup> Or, as Lemarchand puts it in his study on Burundi, 'In a time of crisis, Hutu and Tutsi emerge as the only relevant defining characteristics of group identities, reducing all other social roles to phenomena of marginal social significance'.<sup>47</sup> Overt hostilities continued on Rwandan soil until 2000,

44. For an insightful and powerful description of life in the Rwandan prisons see: Carina Tertsakina, *Le Château: The lives of prisoners in Rwanda* (Arves Books, London, 2008).

45. See for example, Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, pp. 42–3; James K. Gasana, 'La guerre, la paix et la démocratie au Rwanda' in Guichaoua (ed.), *Les crises politiques*, pp. 215–16.

46. Arjun Appadurai, 'Dead certainty: ethnic violence in the era of globalization' in Alexander L. Hinton (ed.), *Genocide: An anthropological reader* (Blackwell, Oxford, 2002), p. 297.

47. René Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnocide as discourse and practice* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), p. 14.

with RPF forces battling with Hutu insurgents invading from their bases in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Tutsi were targeted by these assailants, but this time they were not attacked by their own government, which, after the military victory of the RPF, was considered to be 'on their side'. Counter-insurgency campaigns in the north of the country often resorted to brutal tactics: erasing all Hutu inhabitants in the hills, given that they were indistinguishable from the infiltrators and often supported them. It is thus no surprise that the nature of political representation remained low for ordinary Hutu in that period. Violence was the mode of governance chosen in these years. As a consequence, as can be seen in the graphs, levels of political representation were low for both for Hutu and Tutsi.

Life only approached normality again after the year 2000. But the identity of power holders in key positions at the local level and the (perceived) nature of the exercise of power continue to give an ethnic dimension to the experience of political representation in post-genocide rural Rwanda. Often local administrative personnel in key positions have a particular profile. Often, but not always, they are of Tutsi identity as can be seen from Table 2, which compares these profiles over time in the field sites where life stories were collected. These positions were previously almost exclusively occupied by Hutu.

Although state institutions and state policies are intended to overcome ethnic divisions, they also perpetuate – at least in many ordinary people's perceptions – the very cleavages they are supposed to eradicate. The importance accorded by the central administration, and the power attached to these different posts in the local governance structure, are in the first place reflected in the balance between elected and appointed positions (Figure 5). Only persons occupying appointed positions receive a regular salary from the central/district administration, a privilege reflecting the importance attached to the post. The executive secretary is the most powerful person in the sector. As explained above, s/he is currently often Tutsi, and unknown to the area, having been appointed by central authorities. Elected positions are occupied by Hutu originating from the area, but they are not paid and do not have real power. The executive secretary needs to stick to so-called performance contracts signed with authorities higher up. These contracts are referred to as *imihigo*, and refer to the capability to show others and observers that one is capable and competent in the execution of a given set of tasks.<sup>48</sup> This implies that the chain of accountability goes upwards towards higher authorities and not downwards towards the pop-

48. The concept of *imihigo* refers to the 'heroism' of the soldier in Rwandan culture and history. The soldier attempts through his actions in combat to show his competence and capability as a 'hero'. Recently performance contracts are also being signed with individual peasants. See: 'Performance contracts to be signed at household level', *The New Times*, Kigali, 19 November 2007.

Table 2. Profile of local governance personnel in six field sites (1980–2007)

|                               | Sector 1 | Sector 2 | Sector 3 | Sector 4 | Sector 5 | Sector 6 |
|-------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1980s                         |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| Bourgmestre                   | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     |
| Conseiller                    | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     |
| Responsables                  | Hutu     | Mixed    | Hutu     | Mixed    | Hutu     | Hutu     |
| Dominant Party                | MRND     | MRND     | MRND     | MRND     | MRND     | MRND     |
| 1990–4                        |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| Bourgmestre                   | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     |
| Conseiller                    | Hutu     | Hutu     | Hutu     | Tutsi    | Hutu     | Hutu     |
| Responsables                  | Hutu     | Mixed    | Hutu     | Mixed    | Hutu     | Hutu     |
| Dominant Party                | MDR      | MDR      | MRND/CDR | PL       | MRND/CDR | MRND     |
| 2006–7                        |          |          |          |          |          |          |
| Exec. Secretary (Bourgmestre) | Tutsi    | Tutsi    | Tutsi    | Tutsi    | Tutsi    | N/A      |
| Coordinator (Conseiller)      | Hutu     | Tutsi    | Tutsi    | Tutsi    | Tutsi    | Hutu     |
| Responsables                  | Hutu     | Mixed    | Mixed    | Tutsi    | Hutu     | Hutu     |
| Dominant Party                | RPF      | RPF      | RPF      | RPF      | RPF      | RPF      |

MRND = Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement; MDR = Mouvement Démocratique Républicain; CDR = Coalition pour la Défense de la République; PL = Parti Libéral; RPF = Rwandan Patriotic Front.

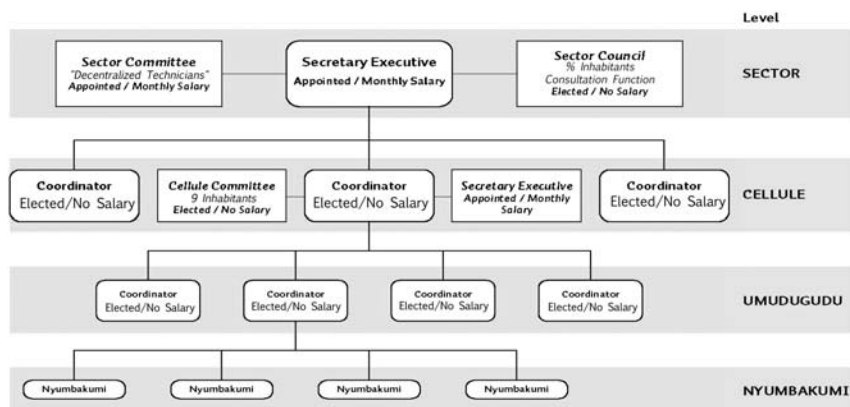


Figure 5. Local governance structure from 2006 onwards.

ulation; the most powerful person is appointed, not elected. The functioning of this structure and its impact is again remarkably similar to what Catharine Newbury found in her study of the social preconditions of the 1959 revolution.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Reyntjens notes that with the outcome of the 1959 Hutu revolution, in terms of the socio-political organization of Rwandan society, 'there had been a change in the occupants of the roles but no major change in the structuring of the roles'.<sup>50</sup> The structures of governance observed in pre-colonial Rwanda thus altered over time, but did not change fundamentally. Also, in post-genocide Rwanda, there is no fundamental difference observable in the functioning of the local governance structure when compared with previous eras, except for the fact that the ethnic identity of the occupants changed in the bulk of the cases.

Both Hutu and Tutsi can contact local authorities if necessary and both are subject to harsh state exigencies. The difference, however, is that the dominant political order serves to guarantee physical safety for Tutsi genocide survivors or Tutsi returnees. As explained, the understanding of the notion of political representation entails the idea that no injustice or prejudice emanates from the structures of power. This understanding, coupled with the (changing) nature of the rankings, signals that Tutsi respondents perceive fewer prejudices in the operating of the structures of government as under the previous regime. But it implies more prejudice in the experience of Hutu respondents.

49. Catharine Newbury, 'Ethnicity in Rwanda', p. 20.

50. Filip Reyntjens, *Pouvoir et droit au Rwanda: droit public et evolution politique, 1916-1973* (Musée Royal de L'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, 1985), p. 515 (translated by the author).

As much as the former regime was overtly vested in the idea of Hutu supremacy, these state contemporary practices perpetuate in a much more tacit fashion what they are supposedly eradicating – Hutu and Tutsi sub-cultures or awareness.<sup>51</sup> It signals an increasing *ethnicization*. It is the continuation in practice and perception of ‘the ethnic division which the RPF-led government denounces in theory’.<sup>52</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The findings of this article shed some light on an almost unobservable variable – ethnicity – in the relatively under-observed rural Rwanda. The ethnic identity of respondents does seem to influence their experience of transition, and the nature of governance and the respondents’ perceived nature of their proximity to power lie at the heart of changes in peasants’ perceptions of political representation. This study thus reveals that – at least in the ‘ordinary’ perception – there has not been a complete detachment of rural Rwandans from their ethnic identities, in spite of claims that ethnicity is not a relevant term for discussing current Rwandan policies and daily realities. It underscores Lemarchand’s observation in relation to the rule of President Bagaza in Burundi (1976–87) when ethnicity was ‘forbidden’: abolishing ethnic references does not mean ethnicity ceases to have meaning and force in daily life.<sup>53</sup> Subsequent events in Burundi have shown the ease with which ethnic identities can be mobilized for violent purposes even after having been ‘abolished’ for years. This observation can only result in a worrisome reflection on the durability of ethnic difference in Rwanda that is currently lurking under the surface of daily life. This observation does not downplay other important rifts in society, such as socio-economic class or rural–urban divide, nor does it eclipse from view the fact that significant variation in ethnic and other social relations exists at the periphery of society.<sup>54</sup> But as the past has shown, if ethnic sentiments remain, they may form a vector of grievance that may be mobilized, and they remain, therefore, a potential source of violence.

However, this is an erroneous way of presenting ‘things’ since it hinges on the assumption that ethnicity needs to be abolished and disappear in order to prevent a return to ethnically structured violence. What is more important is that ethnic identities are influenced by contextual factors, es-

51. Insightful here is the increasing difficulty confronting the open discussion of issues of identity encountered over the years in a project seeking to establish a history curriculum in Rwanda. Sarah W. Freedman *et al.*, ‘Teaching history after identity-based conflicts: the Rwanda experience’, *Comparative Education Review* 52, 4 (2008), pp. 663–90.

52. Pottier, *Re-Imagining Rwanda*, p. 126.

53. Lemarchand, *Burundi*, p. 10, pp. 107–18.

54. See Ingelaere, ‘Living the transition’, pp. 28–31, pp. 43–8.

pecially issues of power. Ethnic identities can acquire political salience: 'It is politics that makes ethnicity significant (or, indeed, insignificant), not ethnicity which invariably defines politics.'<sup>55</sup> Instead of focusing on the adjustment of ethnicities, it would, therefore, be more productive to focus on the social context and political systems in which they thrive and make sure that a resort to violence as a way of doing politics is neither a necessity nor an option. It implies the building of strong and democratic institutions, the existence of sufficient countervailing powers in civic structures, and a politics of inclusion.<sup>56</sup>

This is not the course taken in contemporary Rwandan politics when considering macro-level evolutions of the functioning and nature of the state, its institutions and the post-genocide regime.<sup>57</sup> The research findings also gave insights into how power is exercised at the periphery of Rwandan society. Despite the adoption of democratic procedures and institutions and a clear vision and dedication to develop the country and its people, discussion of the nature of local government structures and the profiles of local authorities reveals the existence of parallel channels of command and accountability, while shadow (local) governments are installed not only to fuel development in the countryside but also to maintain centralized control over the population with lines of command branched deeply into rural life. Although currently mobilized for the development of the country, it was precisely a highly top-down, authoritarian, and non-democratic set of institutional structures and exercise of power that was of crucial importance in the administration of the genocide.<sup>58</sup> Such forces are still present and potentially destructive.

55. Newbury and Newbury, 'A Catholic mass', p. 313: 'The paradox is that ethnicity was simultaneously the product of politics and yet, at times, a powerful determinant of the shape of political culture.'

56. For the importance of civic structures or 'institutionalism' in connection with ethnic identities see Varshney, *Ethnic Conflict*. On the importance of consociationalism as an approach to power sharing in Rwanda, see Stef Vandeginste and Luc Huyse, 'Consociational democracy for Rwanda?' in Stefaan Marysse and Filip Reyntjens (eds), *Political Economy of the Great Lakes Region of Africa: The pitfalls of enforced democracy and globalization* (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 101–22; René Lemarchand, 'Consociationalism and power sharing in Africa: Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo', *African Affairs* 106, 422 (2007) pp. 1–20.

57. Reyntjens, *Rwanda, ten years on*.

58. A comprehensive insight in the administration of genocide and the role of state structures and personnel can be found in Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story* and Straus, *The Order of Genocide*.